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## Conservation Condition Survey

### *Victorian Organ Case*

by Gilbert Scott Jr and Thomas Kempe, ca. 1870



St Michael and All Angels Church  
Moccas, Hereford

Bristol, February 2018



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## CONSERVATION CONDITION SURVEY

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## INTRODUCTION

International Fine Arts Conservation Studios (IFACS Ltd.) was commissioned to undertake a condition survey of the polychrome organ casing at St Michael and All Angles Church, Moccas, Hereford. The survey is required as part of a Heritage Lottery Fund application to seek funds to undertake essential maintenance and conservation of the Victorian organ and its polychrome casing.

The survey was carried out on 15<sup>th</sup> February 2018 and comprised close visual examination, local paint stability testing, cleaning trials and an assessment of the general materials and techniques employed in the construction and decoration of the organ. The existence of any previous treatments, extant coatings and surface accumulations was also considered, as were the potential influence of the local climate in which the organ is sited. Survey observations were recorded in the form of hand-written notes, and through sequential digital photography. Access was from a tower scaffold, which allowed full visual examination of the painted scheme.

The following report details the observed condition phenomena, and a brief summary of the conservation and budget requirements to stabilise and improve the aesthetic presentation of the original polychromy.

## OVERVIEW

This richly decorated, gothic revival organ case was designed by George Gilbert Scott Junior, the eldest son of the eminent Victorian architect George Gilbert Scott Sr., and painted by Thomas Kemp. The apparatus was built by Messers R.Walker and installed in the west end of the church ca. 1870.

It is a symmetrical design comprising a long central section encasing the pipes at the upper end (with a section of long pipes sited in the centre and two rows of shorter pipes sited either side), and a balcony housing the key-desk at the lower end. This central section protrudes forward and is flanked by two large sections of shallow panelling either side.

The colour scheme is typically Victorian high gothic consisting chiefly of greens, reds and gold, but also blues, oranges, browns, whites and blacks. The ornate decorative scheme was applied free hand and through pre-made stencil templates. It consists of Damascus patterns, lettering, rose and petal and various geometric designs. Gold is applied essentially to carved details, including flowers, stars and leaves. The paint



medium appears to be oil and the gold seems to have been applied as gold paint rather than gold leaf

*Central organ casing*

H 4.78 x W 2.34 x D 2.10 metres

*Side panelling*

H 2.58 x W 2 x D 0.50 metres (each side)

## CONSERVATION HISTORY AND CURRENT CONDITION

The casing is generally in a good state of preservation, with moderate degradation at low level associated with wear and tear that would be expected due to the practical nature of the object. Specific issues relating to paint loss are mostly confined to local impact damages. Many of the carved stars, sited along the dark blue painted band above the key-desk, have been lost as a result of failing adhesion but they could be reproduced and re-instated. A programme of ongoing regular maintenance should be considered for the future after the organ has been restored. The local climate within the church does not seem to have had a marked detrimental effect on both the decoration and wooden structure. The wood is in good condition showing no signs of warping, splitting and/or woodworm damage.

Remarkably, the polychromy has never been restored in the past, a rare occurrence considering the age of the artefact. It is important that the organ is restored to a professional standard, where a remedial conservation approach is adopted to preserve the quality of the decoration and retain as much evidence of the original techniques as possible.

### Structural Support

i) Materials and Techniques

The wooden construction has been built with flat panelling and intricate stylised carved motifs adhered or integrated within the main case structure. Cornicing, beadings and other carpentry profiles have been carved or machined and then assembled as building blocks on site. A few flat panels on the sides of the main section and flanking it are hinged and can be opened to access the mechanical parts of the organ. It was not possible to identify the wood type during our survey.



## ii) Condition

The wooden structure is in very good condition displaying no signs of mechanical stress such as twisting, warping and splitting of the timber. There is also no evidence of wood worm damage, contrary to the adjacent old timber arched features and ceiling. All the carving is mostly intact apart from the decorative gilt stars running along the central horizontal blue border. Twenty stars are currently missing; one star is entirely detached and a few minor remnants of other stars are still visible in place.

Several large screw heads are visible in a few locations but it is unclear whether they are original fixtures or have been added at a later date. There is a small damage visible to a board in the upper left side of the pipe casing, which appears to be the result of impact damage. A few profile sections are also slightly worn due to handling and usage.

## iii) Treatment recommendations

The wooden casing appears to have acclimatised to the variable environment within the church. Therefore, it is stable and should not be interfered with. Small losses to the wood would be filled prior to retouching with a conservation wood filler consisting of polyvinylacetate, coconut flour and microballons. The original wood surfaces should be isolated with a coating of Paraloid B72 varnish prior to filling with this mixture.

The missing stars would be re-cast in plaster of plaster by taking a moulding from the extant original. They would be attached to the blue border using Paraloid B72 adhesive (stable and reversible conservation adhesive) or a stronger polyvinylacetate, if necessary. The stars would receive a coating of yellow bole and gold leaf 22 1/2 ct. affixed with size or oil mordant – to be discussed. The gold would be patinated to blend in with the original gold.

## Paint Layers

### i) Materials and Techniques

There is a comprehensive and fairly smooth preparation layer of white pigmentation across the outer wooden surfaces. The decorative composition is painted onto different decorative fields.

The paintwork has been executed in a medium of oil, coloured with what would be expected to be a mixture of natural and synthetic pigments. The palette range is typically gothic revival, and the paint is applied in a variety of ways, using free hand and stippled stencil layering over block background colours. Semi-translucent

paintwork displays the direction of the brush application. The colours albeit soiled are still bright and intensely-tinted.

ii) Condition

The paint layers are in a reasonable condition and the paint film remains generally well adhered to the wood substrate. There are impact damages that are visible as areas of abrasion and loss in the paint surface. This is more frequent in the lower half of the casing. Otherwise, the paint film remains flat and secure showing no signs of age or drying craquelure. The paint losses interfere with the visual appearance of the scheme: dirt and grease deposits have gathered preferentially on those damaged areas, and the colours appear subdued as a result. There are sporadic liquid splatter deposits and candle burn marks under the curved section above the key-desk.

iii) Treatment recommendations

Although not in immediate danger of spontaneous delamination, those areas of paint loss should be consolidated and re-laid as a priority. They will remain vulnerable, and further loss is likely to develop rapidly as environmental factors can now affect the paint surface. If dust and debris is able to enter through lifted paint, this will compromise the future stability of the paint layers, and render future conservation treatment more complex. The brittle edges of losses are also currently prone to fracture and thus further loss of small chips of paint. If re-laid, flat to the wood, the edges will be protected from potential physical damage – consolidation is a prerequisite to surface-cleaning, as there will be a danger of cotton-wool fibres catching in the surface and pulling entire flakes off.

Consolidation tests would be carried out using isinglass and a warm spatula to see how the paint will respond to local treatment. Acrylic dispersions (conservation grade) may also be employed if the isinglass fails to attach the paint sufficiently well. This would be a recommended timely course of action, if a full programme cannot be considered at this moment in time, and the painted decoration cleaned and in-painted at a later date.

### Surface Coatings

i) Materials and Techniques

The paint work carries a thin, brushed layer of varnish, and probably also a layer containing un-refined beeswax. This layer is predominantly visible over the white colours.



## ii) Condition

There is a substantial amount of surface dirt comprising accumulations of dust and sooty particulates. It is thinner and more even over lower areas, but more noticeable as patchy grey layers at higher regions. It is generally contributing to desaturation of the original colours. Accumulations of fly and spider surface deposits also exacerbate the unevenness and discolouration to the rich and saturated original tones. The extant coating is yellowed

## iii) Recommendations

A programme of surface cleaning would be advisable, to remove the thick surface deposits. Long-term, these attract pollutants and moisture, and will contribute to the eventual degradation of the paint work. The wax will also need to be removed. Although the varnish coating oxidised, becoming more yellow, opaque and more solvent-resistant with age, the original colours, in particular the thinly painted reds, are sensitive to cleaning with solvents. Therefore it would be advisable to limit the cleaning to vacuuming and aqueous surface dirt removal until new safer and more effective methods for the removal of varnish is developed in the future. The fly and spider specks appear slightly ingrained on the surface and will require a tailored cleaning system to effectively remove them.

The wax has imbibed dirt but can be cleaned safely with Shellsol D40. As this substance is solvent based, fumes should be ventilated during the cleaning phase, approximately lasting 3 weeks. Alcosol D40 is low in aromatics to reduce smell and toxicity on site. The door to the church should be kept open during cleaning to allow the fumes to escape quickly. A system of extraction will also be installed on site to facilitate air extraction. A provision will be made for the safe disposal of cotton swabs at the end of each day. A notice would be placed outside the door to the church to prevent people from walking in while the polychromy is being cleaned. Personal protection equipment will be worn during this treatment and a safe space should be allocated for the storage of the solvent overnight (a non-flammable metal box would be provided for overnight storage).

Paint losses, abrasions and blemishes would be filled with a soft water based putty and retouched to match the surrounding paint. This could be carried out with gouache base coats and glazes of powder pigments in Paraloid B72 acrylic varnish to re-integrate the paint film fully. This is a stable but reversible retouching system. The screw heads will be left visible if the screws are useful for access and maintenance of the organ equipment.



## PROJECT PROGRAMME

The programme of conservation treatment would be undertaken in situ at St Michaels and All Angels Church from a staged scaffolding to give access all surfaces.

If run on a continuous programme using two conservators, we would anticipate a timescale of approximately 4 weeks.

We would recommend that the organ pipes are removed for conservation before the casing is conserved as this will assist with access for the cleaning and repairs.

It may be necessary to coordinate the treatment of the casing and organ apparatus. Will the organ conservator need to remove timber and hinges in order to remove any mechanical part? If yes, will those be re-instated by them when the organ parts are returned on site?

Each process will be carefully documented during the conservation process.

## BUDGET FIGURES

- Consolidation of fractured paint
- Cleaning of surface dirt, wax and biological specks
- Re-casting missing stars and re-gilding with gold leaf
- Filling and retouching of damages to the wooden support and paint work

Sub-total 14,000.00

- Materials, including 22 1/2 ct gold leaf (1 book) 700.00
- Written and photographic documentation 700.00
- Travel, accommodation, subsistence 3,630.00

Sub-total 5,030.00

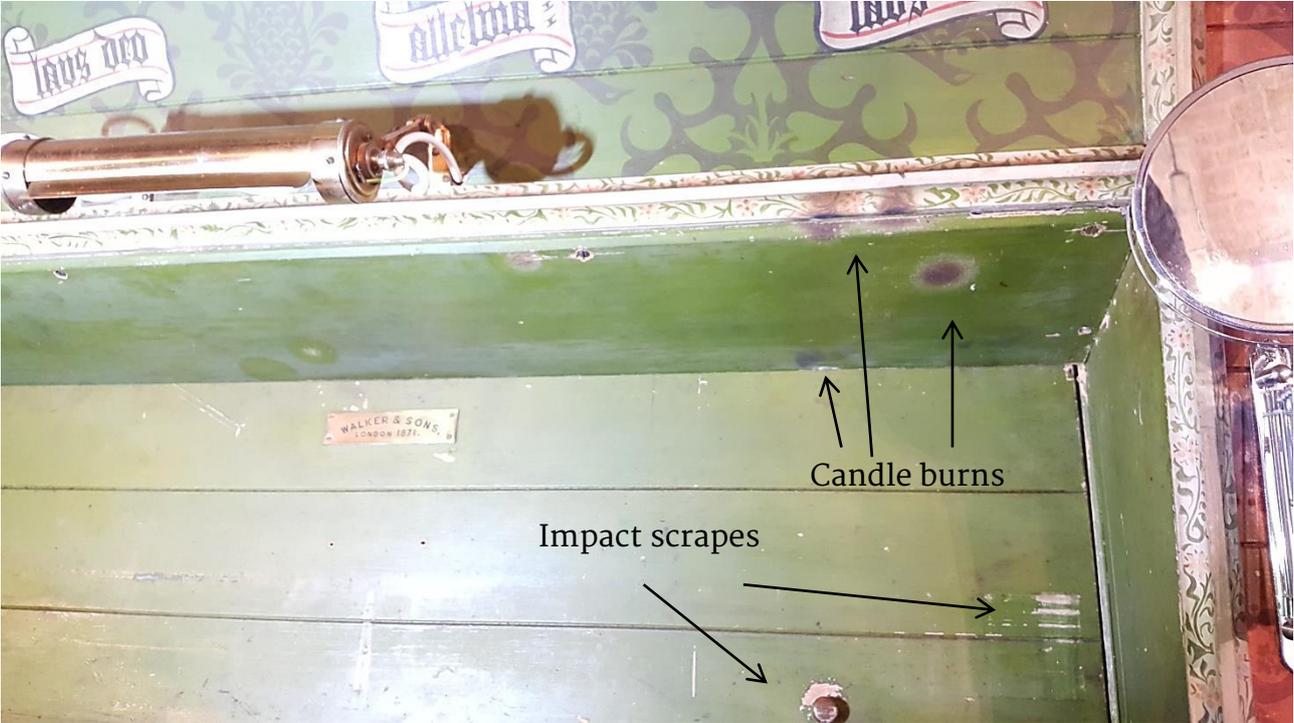
TOTAL (excl. VAT) 19,030.00

\*Scaffolding is to be supplied by the church

ILLUSTRATIONS



General view of the organ before and after installation of the inspection scaffolding. Images before the installation of the scaffolding were sourced from the internet.



Swell organ casing showing burn marks and general wear and tear.



Missing gold  
star mouldings

Candle smoke  
accumulation

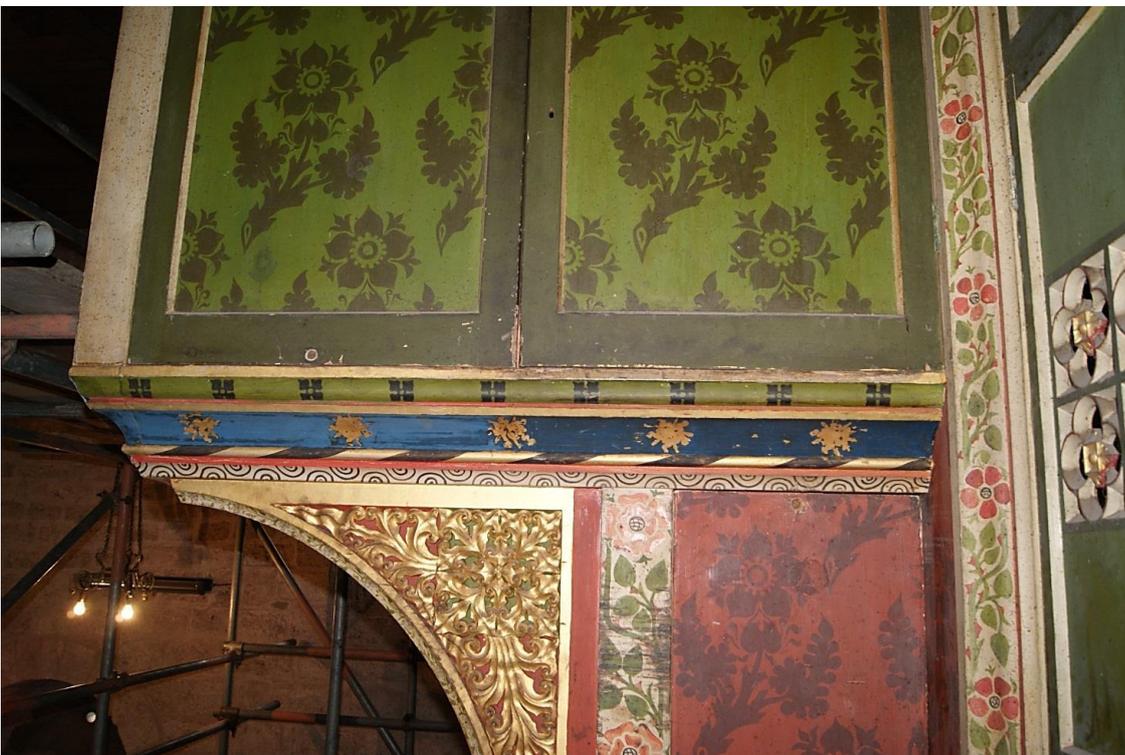


Swell organ showing general wear and tear damage, impact scuffs and scrapes near the pedals and balcony sill.



Details showing residues of yellow paint splatters over the original paint work (above) and impact scrapes across a rose and petal decorative band (right).





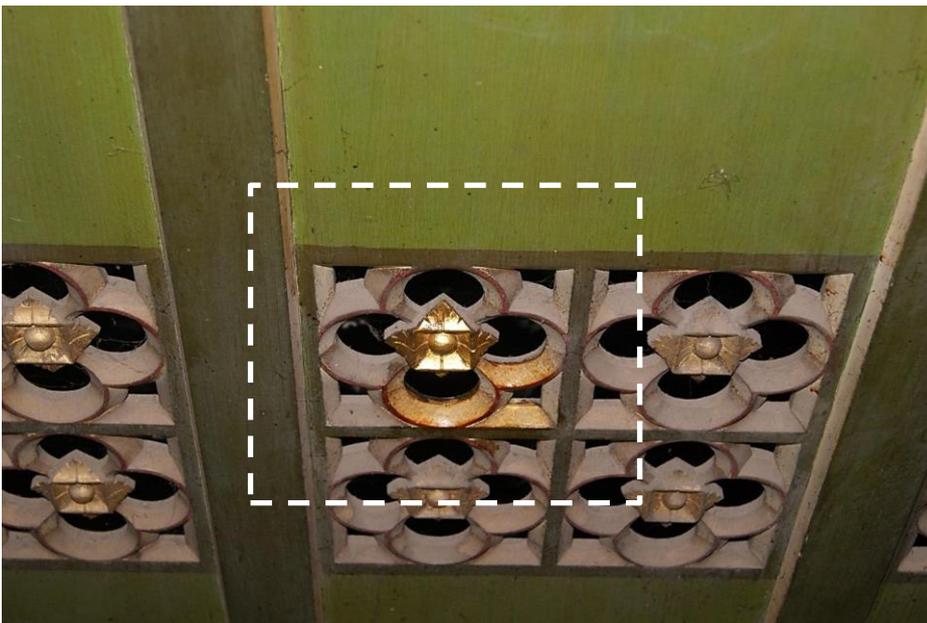
An area to the right side of the organ casing displays evidence of paint damage and degradation, mostly due to wear and tear. The majority of the gilt star mouldings are currently missing and detached from the blue ornamental border. This has partially faded along a section of the right hand side.



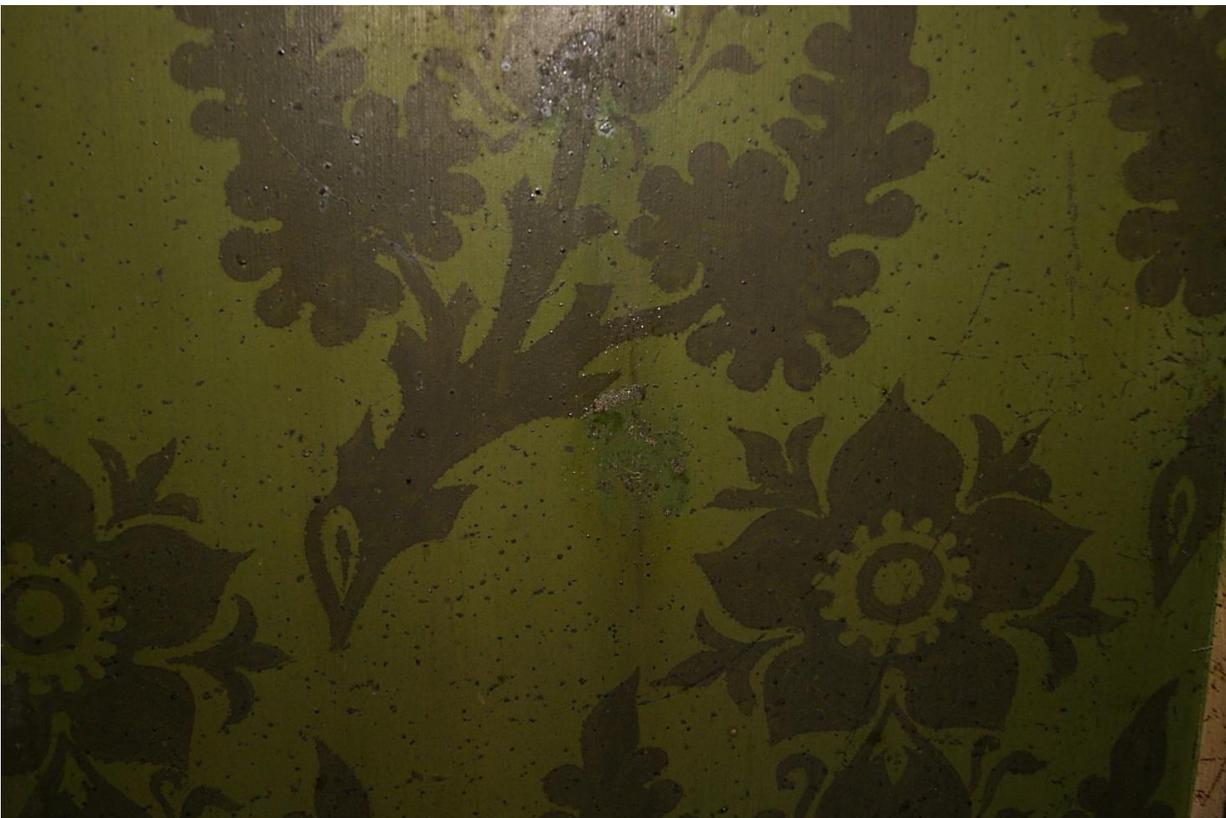
Area to the left side of the organ casing showing evidence of paint damage and degradation. A few remnants of the gilt star mouldings are still attached to the blue painted border. One fallen star is currently placed by the pipes, to the left of the central shaft.



Right hand side of the organ balcony and panelling showing evidence of wear and tear, local impact abrasion damages, surface dirt and liquid splatter stains.



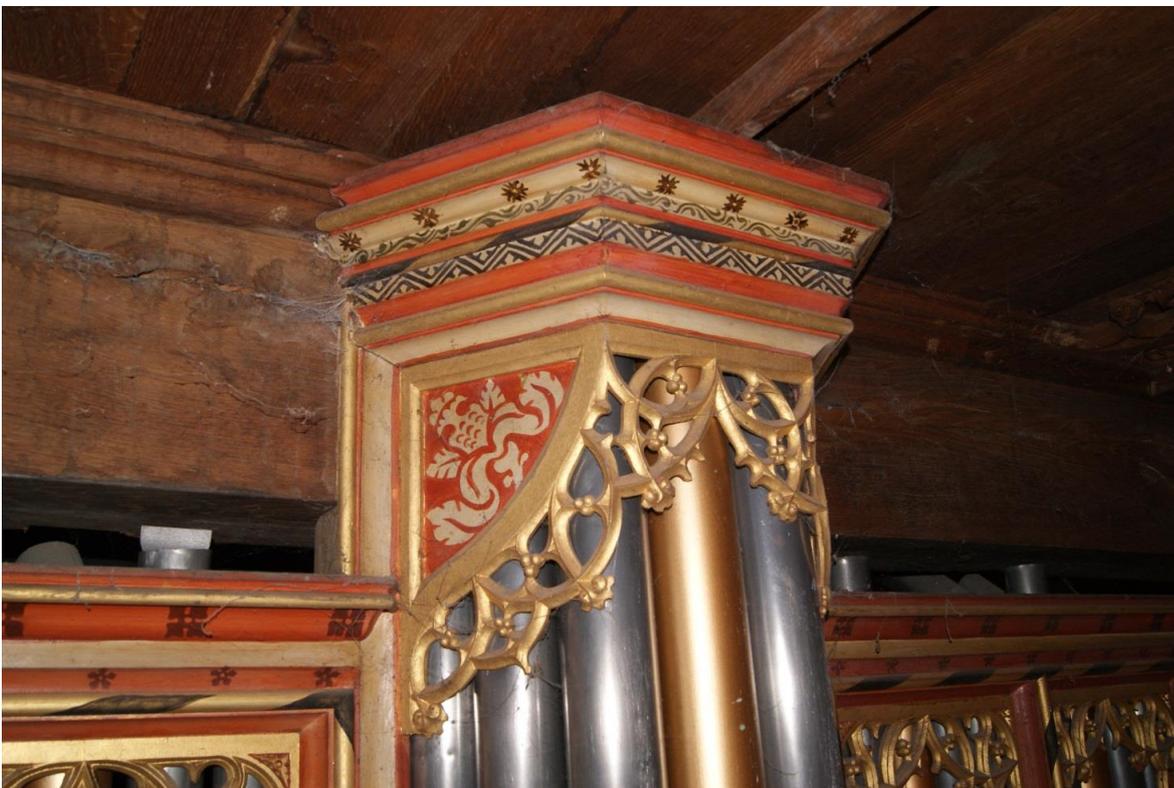
Sites of surface cleaning tests to clear dirt accumulation, extensive fly spots and spider web residues. The latter will require targeted cleaning agents.



Images showing evidence of fly spots and spider web residues across the painted surfaces, in particular the upper section of the organ casing.



Images showing minor area of damage to the wood support (above) and extensive accumulation of dirt above the left side panelling (below).



Details showing the breadth of elaborate carving and stencilled designs applied to the upper section of the organ.



Carved and painted decorative panelling to the sides of the main organ sections.